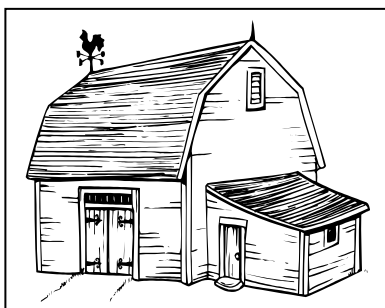


NRCS mission

A primary mission of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is to help people conserve the soil, water, and other natural resources of their lands. At the same time, NRCS considers the effects of its conservation projects on cultural resources. Cultural resources are broadly defined as the traces of past human activities. They include prehistoric and historic artifacts and archaeological sites, buildings, structures like bridges and canals, and concentrations of these properties in residential districts or rural landscapes. Cultural resources also encompass places or properties that are of traditional importance to a group of people such as the sacred sites of Indian tribes.



Cultural Resources and your Conservation Project

Why cultural resources are important

One reason why NRCS considers cultural resources in its conservation planning is that they provide a basis for understanding Maine's past. Prehistoric archaeological sites provide information on over 95 percent of our State's past—the times of unwritten history when Native Americans were the sole inhabitants. These sites also can offer unique scientific data on climatic and other environmental change. Studies of historical archaeological sites can enhance or even correct our knowledge of the more recent past available in written records. Additionally, the preservation and use of historic buildings and traditional properties help today's citizens remember their cultural heritage and enjoy a better sense of community.

Another reason why NRCS emphasizes the protection of cultural resources is that it is required by law. The U.S. Congress has passed a number of laws to protect these non-renewable resources. One of the most comprehensive of these laws is the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Section 106 of this Act requires all federal agencies—including NRCS—to consider the effects of agency activities on significant cultural resources and to do so early in project planning. While thousands of cultural resources exist in Maine, the Section 106 law focuses on the important ones—those resources which meet criteria of the National Register of Historic Places.

How NRCS considers cultural resources in conservation planning

Before NRCS can provide you funding or technical assistance for a conservation project, it must comply with the federal Section 106 regulations to consider the effects of the project on important cultural resources. The NRCS Field Office staff will provide basic descriptive information on the project and its natural and cultural setting to the Cultural Resources Coordinator in the NRCS State Office. In turn, the Coordinator will examine this information, as well as data available from archives, libraries, and consulting parties (for example, the State Historic Preservation Officer at the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Indian Tribes, local historians), to see if your project area contains, or might contain, significant cultural resources. This review may take from a few days to a month to complete, depending on the sources that need to be consulted. In most cases the review will show that a conservation project is unlikely to affect important cultural resources, and NRCS can proceed to help you with your undertaking.

However, in some instances there is either a known cultural resource on your property (for example, historic farm building) or intensive studies may be necessary to identify cultural resources that might exist. These latter studies could be archaeological surveys and test excavations to see if significant prehistoric or historic sites are in your project area. Depending on the size of the project area and the complexity of the study, these investigations and the reviews of their results can take from little over one month to several months to complete. NRCS generally will conduct these historic preservation studies itself or will pay a contractor to conduct them. However, if NRCS has the means to pursue the investigations, but you, as a project landowner or sponsor, do not wish these or other Section 106 studies to occur, NRCS must withdraw all assistance from your conservation practices.

Section 106 studies and reviews often find that no significant cultural resources are present or that the locations of proposed conservation practices can be moved to avoid affecting the resources. NRCS can then proceed with your conservation project. Alternatively, when the Section 106 review finds that a conservation practice would adversely affect a significant cultural resource, NRCS must discuss with you and other consulting parties how to mitigate or reduce the harmful project impacts. This mitigation might include redesigning a project, devising protective buffers for a historic property, recording a historic building, or excavating an archaeological site. These discussions and the implementation of mitigation measures can take several months to accomplish, and some of the mitigation projects can be costly. For these reasons, sometimes landowners/sponsors or NRCS may decide not to pursue the conservation project any further. In both cases, NRCS would need to withdraw all assistance for the undertaking.

Landowner rights and responsibilities

- Provide NRCS with information on known or suspected cultural resources in your project area early in planning a conservation practice in order to prevent later delays.
- Owners of land also generally own the cultural resources upon that land. However, landowners must comply with Maine's state laws regarding the protection of cemeteries and the transfer of Indian human remains to an intertribal repatriation organization.
- If the implementation of a conservation practice brings to light a previously unknown cultural resource (building foundation, artifacts, etc.), stop work in the area of the find and contact NRCS immediately. NRCS will evaluate the resource within several days of the discovery and decide how to treat the resource before or if the undertaking resumes.
- Landowners/sponsors may not begin to implement an NRCS-assisted conservation practice until NRCS itself informs them that the Section 106 historic preservation review has been completed. Premature construction could damage cultural resources and lead to NRCS withdrawing all assistance from the project.

For more information

- Learn about historic preservation in Maine by contacting the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, 55 Capitol St., 65 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333 (tel: 207-287-2132; web site: www.state.me.us/mhpc/).
- Request a copy of the pamphlet "Protecting Historic Properties: A Citizen's Guide to Section 106 Review" from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Suite 809, Washington, DC 20004 (tel: 202-606-8503; e-mail: achp@achp.gov; web site: www.achp.gov).
- Contact NRCS's Cultural Resources Coordinator/Specialist for Maine:

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